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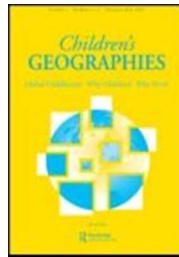
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Strangers and Estrangement: young people's renegotiations of birth and foster family relationships as they transition out of care and the implications for the state as parent

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Strangers and Estrangement: young people's renegotiations of birth and foster family relationships as they transition out of care and the implications for the state as parent

Abstract

Many young people ageing out of state care continue to experience very poor life outcomes. Based on research following 21 care leavers aged 15-18 over three years, this article charts how children's experiences in troubled birth families are often compounded in care by multiple placement moves, the gradual disintegration of sibling units over time, and troubling relationships with the adults charged with their care. It considers the effects of living with strangers and of transient relationships with carers and professionals and explores young people's feelings of rejection by, and responsibility for, their birth families. The capacity of the 'corporate parent' model to ensure adequate attention is paid to relationships in young people's lives is questioned. Hollingsworth's theory of foundational rights, incorporating considerations of relational autonomy, is utilized to reconsider the state's obligations towards children for whom it has taken on the parental role, both during and beyond their legal minority.

Keywords: care leavers; relational autonomy; transitions; family; child-adult relations; rights-based approach

Introduction

Concern regarding the poor outcomes of care leavers is common to care systems across the Western world (Dworsky and Courtney 2009; Jackson and Cameron 2012; Pösö, Skivenes and Hestbæk 2014). This is a diverse but extremely vulnerable population: 92 per cent of English children in care have experienced maltreatment, family dysfunction or acute stress, or absent parenting (NS/DfE 2016). English care leavers are prone to higher rates of depression and anxiety, poverty and homelessness than their peers (Wade and Dixon 2006) and are grossly over-represented amongst sex workers (Centre for Social Justice 2013) and in the juvenile secure estate (Kennedy 2013). A review of evidence from England and France suggests that mental health problems are likely to be exacerbated during the transition from care to independence (Stein and Dumaret, 2011).

While young people's transition to adulthood has generally become longer and more uncertain in recent years, leading to use of the term 'emerging adulthood' for the period between 18 and 25 (Arnett 2000), this transition tends to be 'accelerated and compressed' (Stein 2006, 274) for care leavers. Recognition of their vulnerabilities has led to a variety of legislative initiatives to provide extended support and more normative transitions. In the UK these include the 'Staying Put' or 'continuing care' arrangements, based on a model from the US (Peter et al. 2009), under which local authorities are required to consider enabling care leavers to remain with their foster carers (in England and Wales) or in any placement (in Scotland) until they reach 21 (Children and Families Act 2014; Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and Continuing Care (Scotland) Order 2015; Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014). Advice and support has been extended to all care leavers up to the

age of 25 (Children and Social Work Act 2017), or 26 in Scotland (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014).

Based on English research following 21 care leavers aged 15 to 18 over three years, this paper explores the significance of placement stability and continuity of caring relationships in care leavers' transitions to adulthood. It recounts how experiences of loss, separation and rejection in their birth families may be compounded by precarious placements and transitory relationships with social workers, and explores their renegotiation of family relationships in young adulthood and transitions to independent living. It reconsiders the model of the state as 'corporate parent' for young people who attain practical independence much earlier than their peers, yet often struggle to forge and maintain 'family-like' relationships. Notions of relational autonomy and children's rights are utilized to provide theoretical insight into the significance of caring relationships in the transition to adulthood and justification for support beyond attainment of legal majority. Barriers to young people's capacity to take advantage of such support and the wider implications for young people from separated or reconstituted families are briefly considered.

Placement stability and continuity of relationships in care

Roughly three-quarters of children in care in England live in foster placements (NS/DfE 2016), but a shortage of suitably qualified carers (Sinclair et al. 2007; Colton, Roberts and Williams 2008), together with high levels of vulnerability and behavioural difficulties; inadequate access to mental health services and education provision; and high social worker caseloads, contributes to placement instability (Norgate 2012). The remaining residential institutions care mostly for older, particularly troubled and/or vulnerable adolescents: research highlights that placements average less than a year and ongoing challenges in providing a 'consistently warm and caring environment' (Berridge, Biehal and Henry 2012,

60). Emotional and behavioural difficulties are unlikely to improve until children are in stable, long-term placements (Biehal et al. 2010). Moreover, placement breakdown appears to predict a raised risk of placement instability thereafter (Rock et al. 2015). Care leavers with multiple placement disruptions are at increased risk of substance misuse (Stott 2012), mental health problems, poor educational qualifications, dependence on social welfare, and offending in young adulthood (Vinnerljung and Sallnäs 2008).

Compounding these problems, almost half of sibling groups are separated in care, with 37 per cent of children who have at least one sibling also in care living with none of their siblings (Ashley and Roth 2015). Sen and Broadhurst (2011) draw attention to the fact that most children wish to remain in contact with their birth families, who are often the cause of considerable anxiety to them, but highlight the potential dangers of children becoming embroiled in complex family dynamics.

Family is regarded as the foundation of stability and care in children's transition to adulthood (Valentine 2003) and researchers emphasise the need for caring relationships to be maintained in the lives of children in care through adolescence and into adulthood. However, research in the US and UK has exposed a dearth of such relationships for many care leavers (Schofield 2001; Geenen and Powers 2007; Mallon, 2007). Resilient adaptation in the absence of consistent and caring adult relationships may give rise to an overly strong sense of self-reliance (Cameron 2007; Samuels and Pryce 2008). Self-reliance may be regarded as an exercise of personal agency and may facilitate the development of the skills required for independence, but the context in which self-reliance develops and is exercised is important, particularly the role of inadequate support (Cameron 2007).

Theorising the state's responsibilities to care leavers

Hollingsworth (2013a) has identified four sources of justification for the state's responsibilities towards care leavers through analysis of documents and UK Parliamentary debates leading to the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. Of these, *generational* responsibility (the collective responsibility of adults for the nation's vulnerable children) and *equity-based* responsibility (drawing on the demands of social justice in relation to disadvantaged groups) apply fairly widely. In relation to children in care, the notion of *reparatory* responsibility acknowledges that the state has a duty to make amends to young people who have been let down by society in their treatment before and/or after entering the care system, whilst *assumed* responsibility recognises that state interference in family life and adoption of the parenting role carries with it an obligation to undertake that duty in the manner of a responsible parent.

Concurrently, theorists in the US have developed work on the significance of relationships in the conceptualisation of autonomy. These include relational interpretations of Sen's capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2003, 2011), and Fineman's inclusion of 'social assets' (supportive networks such as family relationships and community groups) as one category of assets required to mitigate vulnerability by enhancing individuals' 'resilience' and for the development of 'full' autonomy (2008). 'Full autonomy' in this context is distinguished from a narrower liberal definition of autonomy (comprising no more than adequate capacity to exercise agency coupled with freedom from external constraints on doing so (Hollingsworth 2013b)), by the incorporation of recognition of the significance of relationships and social context in the identification and exercise of choice.

Hollingsworth utilises accounts of autonomy as a relational concept to analyse the way in which young people's relationships and social experiences shape their developing identities, and how interaction between young people and their social worlds impacts upon the choices

available to them and the way in which they exercise those choices. From this analysis, she has identified a category of rights which support those conditions which enable a child to exercise full autonomy and which Hollingsworth terms 'foundational' rights (2013b). She argues that the implication of the legal construct of childhood as a probationary period is that the state has a duty to ensure that children are equipped to exercise full autonomy on reaching legal majority, when the state removes the protection imposed during their childhood. Hollingsworth developed and used the theory in the narrow context of the youth justice system but I extend its application here to care leavers because for this group of children the state holds both *assumed* and *reparatory* responsibility. One example of the kind of rights Hollingsworth cites as foundational relates to the 'protection of nurturing, positive, relationships that go beyond the prioritisation of certain *forms* of relationship to include also their *quality*' (1062). Blunt and Dowling's notion of 'home' as 'a process of establishing connections with others' and creating a sense of belonging and social inclusion (2006, 11) helps to explain the centrality of placement stability to the fulfilment of such rights. This notion is reinforced by research exploring the relationship between children's feelings of stability and control in their domestic arrangements and their relationships with the adults with whom they share domestic space (see for example Wilson, Houmøller and Bernays 2012). Children in care may build a sense of belonging and family through the enactment of 'normal' and routine family life in foster homes while retaining their connections with their birth family 'home' (Biehal 2014).

The LAC Transitions Study

Following a pilot study, (Author 2011, 2013), the Looked-After Children (LAC) Transitions Study followed 21 young people over the last three school years (ages 15 or 16 to 18), nine of whom were interviewed in all three years. Ethical approval was granted by [author's

institution] and the Association of Directors of Children's Services. The research was informed by the National Children's Bureau *Guidelines for Research* (2009) (since superseded). A total of 65 interviews were conducted; 45 with care leavers, 15 with designated safeguarding leads in schools and colleges; and five with senior staff in local authorities. This article draws exclusively on the data provided by the young participants, although that of professionals endorsed their views.

Young people were accessed through two English local authorities and a charitable organization. Young people attending schools in participating authorities but in care to another authority were also recruited. Considerable barriers to access were encountered, largely attributable to difficulty in engaging schools and teachers taking a protective stance to exclude some young people. Although the sample might be regarded as quasi-opportunistic, a near-inevitable consequence of research with such groups (Barnard and Barlow 2003),¹ the diversity and characteristics of the young participants reflect the constituency of care leavers reasonably well. There were 12 boys (57 per cent) and nine girls (43 per cent), close to the gender ratio nationally at the time the fieldwork commenced (DfE/NS, 2011). Of the 18 whose care status was known, ten (56 per cent) were the subject of care orders and seven were voluntarily accommodated, with one having been remanded into care. This reflects national figures reasonably well, as do the proportion who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) at the end of the study, and their accommodation status at 18, although a higher proportion of young people were equipped to attend university at the end of the study than would be expected (see table 1 and DfE/NS 2013). Only nine were white British and 12 had entered care over secondary school age (11).

¹ For a detailed account of the methodology and issues encountered, see *Author* (2012).

[table 1]

A grounded theory approach was utilised to derive theoretical concepts from the data. The approach to the research was predicated on respect for care leavers as competent participants and as experts by experience. Young people's accounts were prioritised in the selection of categories to foreground their perspectives, appraised in the light of data from professionals, interactions with participants in interview and the insights available from the longitudinal aspect of the study. This paper focuses on the implications of young people's experiences of loss, separation and rejection and their difficulties in achieving 'family-like' relationships which might provide reparation for those in stranger care placements. The qualities of and pre-requisites for family-like relationships are considered and contrasted with the impersonal nature of parental responsibility held at corporate level. The consequences of these cumulative experiences for young people's self-reliance and the implications for social service provision are discussed.

Loss, separation and rejection

Although their personal backgrounds and circumstances varied greatly, experiences of loss, separation and/or rejection had affected the whole cohort. The three asylum-seekers had suffered multiple losses, of their wider community and way of life as well as their family and friends. Farouk remembered travelling with a woman and his siblings to the UK: 'I didn't know her, she came with us here and then she left us...at a chicken shop...and she never came back...'. Bashir had no way of knowing what had happened to his immediate family: 'I knew I'd lost them, there wouldn't be any way back to find them'. When asked what, if anything, she would change in her life, Sofia said simply: 'I just need my mum and my family, that's all.'

Five of the cohort had experienced the death of someone close to them, including, in Devora's case, both parents. Priya entered care aged 13, when she was pregnant, but it appeared the baby had been removed from her. Riley's family 'washed their hands' of him after he set fire to the family home. Young people's relationships with their birth families were a preoccupation for all except Michael, for various reasons, including anger at parental lack of engagement or interest, worry about parents' mental health or well-being, and a sense of responsibility towards separated siblings. At least two of the young people's accounts suggested that they blamed themselves for their removal from home. Habib, for example, explained: 'it was kind of my fault...a social worker came knocking on the door and...there was me and my younger siblings, and I opened the door...I was like six'.

A sense of parental rejection continued to impact most of the young people many years after their entry into care. Adam had decided not to pursue the relationship with his birth family: '...there's been several times they could have arranged to meet me at a secure place...they've just left it for about five years, six years...I don't want to see any of them no more.' Kayla had attempted to meet with her father, whom she had not seen since she was six, but he failed to turn up. She said 'I'm still talking to him on the phone and stuff, but...I'm not really bothered with him anymore...'. Social Services had been unable to find Jacinda's mother, who had lied about her whereabouts: 'I couldn't really trust her, because she lies a lot'. Habib had not seen his family for about eight years and expressed himself more forcefully:

My dad, I don't know him, I don't care. My older brothers, I don't care, I don't like them, I don't associate myself with them. There's been enough times, yeah, they were meant to come to contact...They were just too lazy. So why should I give a fuck with them if they don't give a fuck with me?

Others were more forgiving, but distressed, such as Gilroy, who had not seen his father for four years ('whenever we plan a meeting to go and see my dad he's never in, he's always gone away or he's out'), and Elliott, who would have liked to return home but his mother's engagement in care meetings was erratic ('she comes sometimes, but sometimes she doesn't come').

Taking responsibility for relationships

As young people approached adulthood, they increasingly demonstrated a sense of responsibility for managing birth family relationships. Turning 18 enabled some to re-forge relationships with members of their birth family whom they had previously been prohibited from seeing. Devora took the opportunity to track down members of her mother's family that her father had told her were dead. Riley invested a lot of effort in repairing the relationship with his family, including making a two-hour train journey each weekend to visit, but said: 'Never really tell them much...They just know what they need to know'. Kayla, who had previously chosen not see her mother, had got back in touch, but said: 'she's just like a friend to me now, she's always got young girls at [the] house who are my age, I don't mind...I'm used to it now'.

In light of the deficiencies in relationships with birth parents and carers, sibling relationships were highly valued by participants, but maintaining these was often complicated, as many came from large and/or separated families, with multiple difficulties. The common pattern was gradual dispersal of siblings: by the start of the study, neither Jacinda nor Habib, who each had three siblings, lived with any of them and Kayla shared her foster placement with only one of her six siblings. Adam had three sisters, one in foster care with him, one living independently and one in foster care in his home borough; Imogen had an older sister at

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3 university and a younger one who had been adopted: she had contact with the younger one,
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5 but her mother did not. Callum had two siblings who lived with his father a considerable
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7 distance away and lived with his younger sister until she was moved because of her behavior
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9 and drug misuse: 'I used to see her every day and now I don't see her at all...we are not even
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11 allowed to call her, only certain times, she's not allowed to have a phone'. Kayla saw her
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13 sister 'quite frequently' but managed this relationship with care: 'she can't just depend on
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15 me...So I just like make sure that she knows I'm here...I really go...to see my nieces, that's
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17 important'. In summary, over the course of the study, young people often took on a role
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19 more akin to parenting in relation to both birth parents and siblings.
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25 **Living with strangers**

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27 Perhaps in part due to the ambiguities in their relationships with their birth families, young
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29 people often struggled to settle in care. For many, experiences of loss in their family histories
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31 were compounded by multiple placements. Participants were eloquent about the reality of
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33 living in other people's family units. As Unity said: 'Obviously they are strangers. They just
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35 dump you there...you don't know no-one, you are in the middle of nowhere, and it's a bit
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37 daunting'. Some deliberately disrupted their placements, such as Priya, who explained: 'I told
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39 them that I wanted to move, and Social Service don't listen...so I gave trouble so I could
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41 move'. Qadira 'didn't get on' with a new arrival: 'we had a fight, and then I just took my
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43 stuff and moved'.
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49 Others described a pattern of short-term carers, failure to get on with foster families and
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51 differential treatment from foster parents' birth children. Imogen had 'loads' of carers before
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53 remaining in a placement from age nine to 17, but this placement was stable rather than
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55 happy. Riley had no notice of a move: 'they literally turned up and said right, you're moving,
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57 pack up your stuff'. Tasmin was cared for by four families from the age of eight to 16, finally
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3 settling in the last. She was very unhappy in the third, which made her 'really badly behaved'
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5 in school because she was 'always angry', but her pleas to be moved were ignored until the
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7 carer became pregnant. Jacinda and Kayla also attributed their behavioural shortcomings to
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9 placement problems. Kayla reported that in one of her placements 'we just didn't want to be
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11 there, so we all played up', while Jacinda was very happy in her first, short-term, placement,
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13 and upset to be moved: 'I just didn't want to be there, so I was a bit of an annoying child'.
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18 In one of Jacinda's placements 'the parents' daughter...used to like hit me and my little
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20 brother, like kick us around...'.² Priya likewise claimed to have been assaulted in residential
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22 care homes, of which she experienced four, while Riley described neglect in his first
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24 residential home: 'I spent more time with the police and in hospital...They just done their own
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26 thing and left us to...run around like idiots'. The second was 'a lot better...staff just made you
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28 feel like it was your home, they looked after you, they done things with you, they talked with
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30 you. Helped me when I needed it'.
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35 Unity was angry to have been moved out of her home area, to keep her away from influences
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37 deemed harmful to her. She thought she had been in about ten placements, consistently
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39 running away (and consequently experiencing four periods of secure accommodation) until
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41 she eventually settled in the last, which was back in her home area, and where she remained
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43 for over a year, but it did not cater for those over 16. This was common practice in care
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45 homes (Unity and Priya were moved to semi-independent accommodation and Riley to
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47 supported lodgings at 16) and results in another move to council accommodation at the age of
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49 18.
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55 ² Evidence as to the prevalence of maltreatment in foster care and in kinship care is limited, particularly in the
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57 UK, but there is some cause for concern that thresholds for the identification of maltreatment are lower in
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59 relation to foster carers than birth families and/or that the 'rule of optimism' creates barriers to professional
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acknowledgement (Biehal, 2014a: 58).

Family, Home and Belonging

Just over a third of the group appeared to have enjoyed stable and supportive placements, but Jacinda, Kayla (sometimes) and Michael were the only participants to refer to their foster carers as their ‘parents’. Jacinda genuinely felt part of her foster family: ‘I’ve been with my family for so long I just don’t feel I’m in care now’. She attributed this strong relationship to the length of time she had been with the family, but also thought she was ‘one of the lucky ones in care’, whose foster family treated her as they did their own children. Jacinda knew she had a family for life: ‘they always say that I’m part of the family...if I do want to leave I can but they’ll still be there if I want to come back’.

Similar promises had been given to Adam, Tasmin and Kayla. Kayla felt loved and respected by her carer, and reported that although the leaving care team said she would have to leave at eighteen, ‘my carer said I can stay until...I’m ready to move out, they are not going to get rid of me...I can always come back’. Promise of an ongoing relationship was especially important to Kayla, who found it difficult to make personal relationships, particularly with boys. She thought that her foster father and brother had helped significantly with those challenges, adding ‘I think it will get better as I grow older, and I’m still in contact with my carers. If I’m not, I think...I’ll retrack a bit and just go back how I was’.

Imogen only confided after the placement broke down that she had not had a good relationship with her foster mother since she was ten or 11, although she had ‘got along’ with the rest of the family, which in part explained why she had stayed until the carer had locked her out and refused her re-entry. For Habib, realisation that he was treated differently from his carers’ birth children dawned gradually, and he felt increasingly alienated until the relationship broke down irrevocably after the death of one of the carers. He reflected: ‘I was

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3 with them for like five years...they've decided to let me go and they've never like even
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texted me back...I ain't gonna really do eff...for people who don't care about me'.

Often young people struggled to create a 'family-like' relationship with carers without undermining their sense of loyalty to their birth family, a position which may be particularly complex for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, whose family remain in their country of origin and who are anxious to maintain links with their own culture (Wade et al. 2012). Bashir described his relationship with his carers thus: 'I've made roots with them, but not...as strong as if it was my own parents, obviously'.

Corporate parenting and interpersonal relationships

Given the dearth of 'family-like' relationships in participants' home lives, it is concerning that young people expressed frustration at high levels of surveillance, intrusion and bureaucracy in social work practice: Tasmin, for example, felt 'like I'm in the Big Brother house'. Her foster carer had 'to write notes about us and then send them to the social worker...I feel like I'm being watched all the time'. Qadira objected to her social worker being 'just too much in your business'. Participants complained that it was difficult to obtain timely (or any) responses to requests and yet social workers appeared to visit or complete administrative tasks for no specific purpose other than regular monitoring. Imogen said 'they always give you this form that you have to fill out...and nothing ever happens'. Riley tolerated rather than drew support from his personal advisor, who initiated contact 'normally when she wants to get something done'.

Administrative delays could cause considerable difficulties for young people at this time in their lives. Priya blamed missing out on a place at college on delay in her post being

forwarded to her new accommodation; Callum's return to school following an injury was delayed because arrangements for a taxi were not made; while Farouk and Devora both had a long wait for receipt of their National Insurance numbers enabling them to work. Jacinda nearly missed a holiday because of difficulties obtaining her passport and faced delays in obtaining her College bursary when between social workers; Imogen had been unable to see her birth family for 'quite a while' because she was waiting for social services to arrange it. Farouk's college registration was revoked because of his immigration status and he was quite low in interview, because he was unable even to join a local football club without the local authority's agreement. The high turnover of social workers, an issue highlighted in the literature (Berridge et al. 2008), was a particular complaint: 'I've had oh so many social workers....' (Devora); 'I lost count...So many.' (Habib); 'I have no idea, they keep on changing...' (Imogen); 'Can't count...I can't even remember some of their names ...They come and go so quickly...' (Jacinda).

The cumulative effect of these issues was that almost all young people described poor relationships with their social workers, and many felt let down by them. Only Adam expressed regret at changing social worker on moving to the Leaving Care team ('she's been there for me over the years'). Riley's response was typical: 'I just don't get on with social workers...Because they say they'll do something and they don't, or they'll say they'll come and see you and they don't'. But in some cases problems ran deeper than the avoidance of committing to a relationship that was likely to be transient or unreliable. Unity's explanation for her extremely difficult behaviour was 'I just think that I didn't like my social worker, an absolute bitch, I don't think she really thought about how I felt'. Despite her own difficulties with her brother's behaviour, which included stealing from her, Tasmin was concerned to

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3 protect him from what she regarded as defective social work: 'I'm like...he's a piece of
4 paper, and your pay cheque, you really don't know him'".
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10 *Self-reliance and independent living*

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12 The cumulative effect of the issues recounted above tended to manifest in participants taking
13 control over their own lives as far as possible. Many demonstrated considerable initiative in
14 doing so. Often the consequences of such self-reliance were positive: young people readily
15 took responsibility for decisions and were proactive in, for example, making their own
16 arrangements for contact. However, positive instances usually concerned young people who
17 described generally good levels of support from social workers and/or carers, such as Adam,
18 who was very appreciative of support from his carers, school and social workers, but quick to
19 point out that his success would be down to his own endeavours and the support of friends.
20 Riley did not seek assistance from his personal advisor because 'I can do it on my own, don't
21 need them'. The local authority had tried to move him back nearer his home address at 16,
22 but he had refused, explaining that he needed to stay away from adverse influences. But those
23 who were most adamant that they controlled decisions in their lives were more likely to have
24 dropped out of college and/or become NEET as the study progressed, such as Gilroy ('I make
25 my own decisions... if I want to do something I do it'; Unity ('I think it's all down to
26 myself'); and Qadira ('I like listening to myself, and doing things in my own way. I don't like
27 listening to no-one').
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49 The initiative and self-reliance exhibited by young people may account in part for the
50 tendency for living independently to become more attractive to them as time progressed. This
51 finding appeared to apply to some of the young people in successful, stable placements as
52 well as to those who were less settled. They cited a variety of reasons, including an aversion
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to living with strangers (Priya); not having such strong relationships with foster carers as they would with their birth parents (Bashir); choosing to live with a sibling (Farouk); feeling it was important to 'get on the [housing] ladder early' (Adam); liking the idea of having their own flat; not getting on with a recent arrival in supported lodgings (Riley); no longer being ordered about (Imogen); and worrying about being a significant drain on their (kinship) carer's finances (Devora). Others, such as Callum and Imogen, had not chosen to live independently, but had been forced to do so following placement breakdowns. Only four young people seemed likely to 'stay put' in their foster placements beyond age 18, while at least 13 were or would be living independently at or shortly after reaching 18 (see table 1), although it should be remembered that the Staying Put provisions were not available to this group. Some young people found the prospect of living independently daunting: Devora and Tasmin both said they were 'scared', and Bashir was worried about the effect it was likely to have on his studies. Callum, despite a history of allegations of violence, said: 'at first I couldn't handle it, living by myself...every little noise I would hear I would get scared...really paranoid...I would just get very lonely'.

Discussion

Social outcomes for this cohort at the cusp of legal adulthood were highly divergent. The four girls who entered care when of primary-school age (Imogen, Jacinda, Kayla and Tasmin) referred to having close or 'best' friends: three of these and Devora reported close relationships with their carers. In contrast, the four late entrant girls (Priya, Qadira, Sofia and Unity) were all living alone and appeared socially isolated. The picture for boys was less clear, but only Adam and Michael, also both young entrants, achieved family-like relationships with their carers. Younger entrants also achieved greater educational success. Hence the study confirms previous work linking late entrance into care with placement

1
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3 stability, leaving care early and poor outcomes (e.g. Sinclair et al. 2007, Biehal et al. 2010).
4
5 Recent attention, however, has focused on the need for the corporate parent to act as an
6
7 educated and ambitious parent and research in this area has generally remained welfare-
8
9 oriented and rooted in social care discourses. This study draws attention back to the
10
11 fundamental significance of caring relationships in parenting, but uses a rights-based
12
13 perspective to shift the focus from young people's perceived deficiencies to the
14
15 responsibilities of the state.
16
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18
19

20 21 *Corporate parenting but individual children*

22
23 When the state wrests children's care from their parents, this assumed responsibility imports
24
25 an onus to act as a reasonable parent. Yet this study supports Bullock et al.'s conclusion that
26
27 'the 'state' as an impersonal entity cannot provide the day-to-day care of normal 'parenting''
28
29 (2006, 1349; see also Bluff et al., 2012). Focusing on relational interpretations of capabilities
30
31 reinforces the importance to the child of the corporate parent having a human face. For the
32
33 vast majority of children, parental responsibility vests in their birth parents. The adult making
34
35 day-to-day decisions with or on behalf of a child is also the person who cares most for and
36
37 about them and with whom they have the closest relationship. In contrast , parental
38
39 responsibility for children in care vests in the elected members and council officers of the
40
41 local authority; the English corporate parent of a large conurbation may hold responsibility
42
43 for an exceptionally large and diverse 'family'.
44
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48
49 Regulations³ have been amended since the study to promote the delegation of day-to-day
50
51 decisions to foster carers or residential care workers. These changes may enhance children's
52
53 sense of family belonging and 'home', but in themselves cannot address the strategic failings
54
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56

57
58 ³ Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 paragraphs 3.139-3.146 as amended by the Care
59
60 Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013.

in corporate parenting that currently lead to poor placements; multiple moves; or placements far from the child's birth family. Nor will they materially assist young people who do not have a good relationship with their foster carer. Further, where parental responsibility and care are separate, and in the absence of compensatory consistent and trusting relationships with social workers, children and carers are likely to continue to be subjected to intrusive surveillance and it is less likely that significant decisions will be taken with a full understanding of an individual child's wishes and feelings. Following the Munro review (2011), attention has been paid to strengthening social work training and a return to relationship-based practice. However, the child and family social work profession remains afflicted by a long-term shortage in supply, high turnover, low morale, and limited opportunities for promotion at the front-line (Holmes, Miscampbell and Robin 2013). The findings of this study confirm that urgent attention must be given to the recruitment and retention of good quality foster carers (Colton et al. 2008), a key research priority identified by the Department for Education (2014), and that consideration should be given to the vesting of parental responsibility in an individual where appropriate.

Support for care leavers

The leaving care provisions enacted since 2000 represent acknowledgement that in an age of emerging adulthood, *assumed* parental responsibility involves supporting children well beyond 18, as the vast majority of parents do. They are also justified by the notion of *reparatory* responsibility, because the greater the harm suffered by children before entering care and the later state intervention to protect them, the longer will be the journey to reparation. However, these provisions have focused on practical and educational support. Attention to young people's relational experiences in care demonstrates that the notion of

1
2
3 *reparatory* responsibility needs also to be conceptualised in terms of repairing young
4
5 people's access to, and ability to make and maintain, close familial or quasi-familial links.
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10 None of the study participants referred to informal sources of stable adult relationships such
11
12 as those explored by Gilligan (2008). In addition to promoting relationships formed through
13
14 recreational and other activities, the findings of this study suggest that Staying Put should be
15
16 extended to all placements forms (as in Scotland), greater support should be accorded to
17
18 sibling relationships, consideration should be afforded to disbanding Leaving Care teams in
19
20 favour of social work continuity, and the role of designated leads in colleges and universities
21
22 should be developed. The 'corporate parenting principles', services required in local offers to
23
24 care leavers, and extension of personal advisor support introduced by the Children & Social
25
26 Work Act 2017 suggest that the issue now has the attention of legislators. However, as this
27
28 study illustrates, realization of these ideals can only be achieved through interpersonal work
29
30 at the individual level. The experience of young people such as Jacinda attest to the fact that
31
32 it is possible for foster care to provide a 'family for life', even after further maltreatment in
33
34 care, but this remains an exceptional outcome.
35
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40 Through its attention to relational aspects of autonomy, Hollingsworth's concept of
41
42 foundational rights enhances recognition of the primacy of relationships in adolescence and
43
44 emerging adulthood by effectively raising the status of stable and caring relationships to a
45
46 provision right. Foundational rights theory also posits that the state's duties to care leavers
47
48 are heaviest towards those in greatest need of reparation, not just for the state's failure to
49
50 protect them from parental maltreatment or inadequacies, but also for the way in which
51
52 young people's experiences of the care system may compound their relational vulnerabilities
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54 and promote a sense of self-reliance that precludes the development of trusting relationships.
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These pathways to exclusion are convincingly illustrated by Stein's categorisation of care leavers (2012), in which 'strugglers' become alienated from or rejecting of professional support. When so many young people, like Habib, are separated from siblings, feel rejected by both their birth and foster families, and have lost count of the number of professionals in their lives, the proportion of care leavers ending up in custody (as did Gilroy) or homeless (like Niall) should come as no surprise.

Conclusion

Tisdall and Punch (2012, 259) describe the Childhood Studies literature as 'replete with examples of young people as socially competent agents, with little space for alternatives', highlighting the danger that vulnerability may become overlooked in this context and the need to pay greater attention to the primacy of relationships in young people's lives. The LAC Transitions Study addressed both these concerns in the context of care leavers, who provide an extreme example of key challenges in emerging adulthood, including identity formation, taking responsibility for decisions and experiencing unstable accommodation. These issues and utilization of the concept of reparatory responsibility should be considered in the context of the much larger group of children on the threshold of care, or in families regarded as 'troubled', in order to interrogate the state's responsibilities towards the most disadvantaged young people. The study findings also have wider implications, pointing to the importance of supportive adults and sibling relationships for young people in separated or reconstituted families, where they face similar challenges in reconciling birth family loyalties with the forging of new family-like relationships. Attention to relational autonomy in the context of vulnerable children elucidates the complexities and ambiguities of young people's apparent exercise of agency where excessive self-reliance is a response to their experiences

of relationships with key adults in their lives. Further research which challenges the artificiality of the adult-child boundary through the frameworks of relational autonomy, emerging adulthood and foundational rights would be of value.

For Peer Review Only

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Table 1: Table of participants’ characteristics, age of entry into care and outcomes at the end of the study.

| Name* (gender) | Ethnicity | Age at entry into care | Education/ employment status/plans at 18 | Accommodation at end of study |
|----------------|-------------------|------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Adam (M) | White | 9/10 | University/apprenticeship | Independent shortly |
| Bashir (M) | Asian DLR† | 12/13 | University offers | Independent shortly |
| Callum (M) | White | 11 | No plans | Independent |
| Devora (F) | White | 13/14 | College/year out | Independent shortly |
| Elliott (M) | Mixed | 11 | NEET | Unknown |
| Farouk (M) | Asian UASC‡ | 10/11 | Unknown | With brother |
| Gilroy (M) | Mixed | 11 | NEET | Custody |
| Habib (M) | Asian refugee | 9/10 | College/Marines? | Semi-independent |
| Imogen (F) | Black | 8/9 | College | Semi-independent |
| Jacinda (F) | Mixed | 5/6 | College/university? | Foster care |
| Kayla (F) | Black | 5/6 | University | Foster care |
| Luis (M) | Mixed | 6/7 | Long-term support | Foster care |
| Michael (M) | White | 4 | Unknown | Foster care |
| Niall (M) | White | 13 | NEET | Semi-independent |
| Ollie (M) | White | ? | Long-term support | Residential care |
| Priya (F) | Asian | 13 | NEET | Semi-independent |
| Qadira (F) | Black | 12/13 | NEET | Semi-independent |
| Riley (M) | White | 15 | NEET | Supported lodgings |
| Sofia (F) | Black/mixed UASC‡ | 16 | Unknown | Semi-independent |
| Tasmin (F) | White | 8 | University | Foster care |
| Unity (F) | White | 11 | NEET | Semi-independent |

*All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants and schools

†Discretionary Leave to Remain

‡Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child